DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 488 IR 057 759

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TITLE	The U.S. Federal Depository Library Program and U.S. Government Information in an Electronic Environment: Issues for the Transition and the Millennium.
PUB DATE	1999-08-00
NOTE	11p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/053-83e.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Information; *Depository Libraries; Electronic Libraries; *Electronic Publishing; Federal Government; *Government Publications; Information Technology; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	Government Printing Office; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

Since 1895, the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), administered by the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), has provided no-fee public access to information generated by the U.S. government through a network of libraries. For 200 years, print-on-paper remained the dominant format. By 1978, publications were also distributed in microfiche; CD-ROM products followed in 1988, as well as the development of the GPO Access World Wide Web site for online publications in 1994 and other initiatives to harness government information on the Internet. Opportunities to improve public access exist alongside obstacles to equitable distribution and access. Now over half way through a 5-year transition plan, GPO has defined and established an electronic depository library collection for the new millennium. Problems remain with reform of the underlying legislation, the enforcement of deposit compliance by government authors, and the guaranteed provision of permanent public access. Librarians struggle to keep up with sources, formats, and technology and to shape library services for both traditional and digital environments. (Contains 36 endnotes.) (Author/MES)

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ED 441 488

IFLANET
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Search Contacts
Annual Conference

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand,
August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 053-83-E
Division Number: V
Professional Group: Government Information and Official Publications
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 83
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

The U.S. Federal Depository Library Program and U.S. Government Information in an electronic environment: issues for the transition and the Millennium

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Abstract

Since 1895 the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), administered by the United States Government Printing Office (GPO), has provided no-fee public access to information generated by the United States Government through a network of libraries. For two hundred years print-on-paper remained the dominant format. By 1978, publications were also distributed in microfiche; Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) products followed in 1988, the development of the GPO Access web site for on-line publications in 1994, and other initiatives to harness government information on the Internet.

Opportunities to improve public access exist alongside obstacles to equitable distribution and access. Now over half-way through a five-year transition plan, GPO has defined and established an electronic depository library collection for the new millennium. Problems remain with reform of the underlying legislation, the enforcement of deposit compliance by government authors, and the guaranteed provision of permanent public access. Librarians struggle to keep up with sources, formats, and technology and to shape library services for both traditional and digital environments.

IR057759

Paper

Recognizing that a democracy requires the free flow of information and that access to

government information is a fundamental right of a free society, the United States (U.S.) government began, soon after the first Continental Congress in 1774, to form what we would identify in our time as information policy. By 1813, a regular pattern of free and geographically dispersed dissemination of government information to the public was already in place.[1] Foundation for a formalized system of deposit and a Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) within the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) was laid in a series of legislative acts and has remained relatively unchanged in principle and structure since 1895.[2] The last three decades of this century have been dominated by efforts of the federal government bureaucracy to economize, reduce paperwork,[3] and "reinvent" itself to increase efficiency.[4] This climate has created legislative, operational, and service issues for the FDLP, GPO, and libraries. Current responses from GPO[5] and the library community to these issues and to the transition from paper to electronic publication and distribution will define not only the depository library program but also the provision of government information for the new century.[6]

At the brink of the new millennium, the FDLP consists of over 1350 designated libraries located in fifty states, the District of Columbia, and six territories. For over 100 years the FDLP, as administered by GPO, has provided equitable and dependable no-fee public access to the tremendous amount of publishing which the U.S. government generates. Agencies in each of the three branches of the federal government create, gather, and produce information in conjunction with their official missions. This information is paid for with public funds, is owned by the public, and must be made accessible to the public by law. The government holds the information in trust and is obligated to provide access to it and to guarantee its integrity and preservation.[7]

Working in partnership with federal agencies, GPO acquires materials, produces copies at congressional expense, catalogs, indexes, and distributes them to the network of depository libraries with an efficiency and cost effectiveness made possible by its centralized position in the government and its legally designated status. In turn, the libraries safeguard the public's right to know by collecting, organizing, maintaining, and preserving the publications, making them freely accessible to the general public in all formats without impediment or fees in an impartial environment and with professional assistance. Depository libraries are subject to periodic government inspection; provide storage, equipment, and space; and develop training tools, networks, and partnerships to facilitate and support public access. This has become an increasingly difficult task given the expanding array of information sources and the complex information choices.[8]

By the 1990s GPO had become as much a procurement agency as a printer, with the majority of non-congressional production being obtained under standing contracts negotiated by GPO with the private sector.[9] During this period, the long-standing problem of documents that qualify for the program but through agency oversight or noncompliance are not made available to GPO for distribution has been exacerbated. As valuable information continues to elude the net of depository distribution, the amount of publicly accessible government information decreases. Capturing this information has become more difficult for GPO as agencies have obtained their own desktop publishing software and high speed, high volume copiers, in addition to developing sites on the Internet. Libraries are forced to pursue this "fugitive" information from individual agencies and from private sector vendors in order to offer comprehensive collections to their users.

GPO began converting selected documents were converted from paper to microfiche format for distribution to depository libraries in 1977 in the first of several cost-cutting steps away from the dissemination of print-on-paper. Although the introduction of microfiche caused some consternation among librarians and users, this first shift in technology was relatively easily assimilated into the operation of the FDLP and depository libraries. In almost every respect, except its use by the reader, microfiche is produced, disseminated, and collected like printed matter, and despite its negative attributes, its distribution has achieved significant

savings in cost for GPO and in storage space for libraries. The move to fiche did make librarians aware, however, that in an era of cost/benefit analysis, the FDLP was under scrutiny and that it was no longer possible to rely on the ideological goodwill of a benevolent Congress. Microfiche was but a harbinger.

Publishing and storage of electronic formats, which began with the development of computer mainframes in the late 1950s, was well underway in 1988 when the first Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) product was distributed to depository libraries. Distribution of CD-ROM disks resembled the introduction of microfiche in that GPO was still shipping a physical object, an "information product", to libraries. Here, however, the similarities ended, and the conflicts for libraries and the FDLP began in earnest. As with the first fiche, many depository libraries were unprepared for electronic distribution. Users who had access to appropriate equipment were met with a medium that required a completely new sensibility for use and which carried with it little or no assistance in the way of documentation or instruction. And it was only the tip of a rapidly emerging iceberg.

Since the beginning of the Clinton Administration in 1992, the federal government has been pulled rapidly into the electronic age. Legislation in that year required GPO to disseminate government information products on-line, to maintain an on-line directory or locator of federal information sources in electronic format, and to address permanent public access by establishing a storage facility for electronic information files.[10] In response GPO unveiled its award-winning Internet information service site, GPO Access in 1994.[11] In the preceding decade, GPO had grappled with attempts by the Reagan and Bush administrations to privatize many of its functions. Integral to this struggle was the question of whether or not on-line information falls within the legislative parameters of Title 44--in effect whether there is some distinction between "information product" and "information service" when the definition hinges on the presence or absence of a physical object.[12] At the same time, the administration sought to alter and consolidate a variety of administrative and regulatory practices that controlled public access to information, including revisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 and the issuance of Office of Management and Budget guidelines on information policy.[13] Since 1992 it has become more widely accepted that the distinction between product and service was largely artificial and served the commercial ends of private sector firms involved in marketing government information better than it served the public. Along with the proliferation of electronic resources, we have witnessed the growth of the notion that access to government information should not be ruled by the format or medium of that information.

Two strong ideological strains mark the current political climate in Washington, DC. The first is that government should, for a host of economic and ideological reasons, be made smaller and more efficient. The implications of this line of thinking for GPO have been serious. Although the actual functions of printing and the wide spectrum of information dissemination have grown apart rapidly, GPO has remained a primarily print-based operation despite tremendous progress in managing, handling, distributing and disseminating information in multiple formats. There have been repeated moves to shrink the GPO radically or eliminate it entirely in favor of individual agencies procuring their own printing services, with a depository library system administered by some other agency.[14] The second complementary strain, that has come into prominence since 1994, is the attempt to balance the federal budget by imposing stringent economizing measures upon all federal programs. In addition, Congress has a broad belief in the ability of technology to shrink costs in the bureaucracy and reform society simultaneously. Thus, the seven years since President Clinton took office have been highly uncertain for GPO generally and the FDLP in particular.

During this period of advancing uncertainty, librarians began to articulate their vision of a "reinvented" FDLP. The Chicago Conference Report of October 1993 reaffirmed the basic principles stated earlier that year by the Dupont Circle Group[15] and defined a framework for a model federal information program:

1. The FDLP would be characterized by timely, equitable, and no-fee provision of government information to the public with a cooperative network of information producing agencies, geographically dispersed participating libraries, and a central coordinating government authority.

2. The information would be made available in formats most appropriate to content, use, and audience and defining legislation would be broadly inclusive of all types of information in all formats and media.

3. Agency participation would be assured and the program should facilitate partnerships between its constituents.[16]

By 1995, debate in the House centered on GPO budgetary issues, cutting congressional funding for paper documents as an "incentive" for agencies to move to electronic dissemination. The Senate, however, insured a level budget for GPO in 1996 and directed the Public Printer to undertake a comprehensive study to assist Congress in redefining a new and strengthened federal information dissemination policy and program.[17]

The Public Printer's study was prepared in two parts: the strategic Transition Plan for completing the move from print to electronic format by 1998, which was issued in December 1995 and revised in June 1996,[18] and the final full report of June 1996, which extended the transition time frame to a more reasonable 2001.[19] The current scene, just past mid-point in the Transition Plan, is the result of an almost unimaginably aggressive program of conversion to electronic formats both at the production level, where new products are created in a standardized format and at the distribution/dissemination level.

Although the FDLP cannot be characterized as completely electronic in 1999, considerable and remarkable change has taken place. For example, from Fiscal Year (FY) 1996 to FY1998, the percentage of paper products distributed to depository libraries dropped from 45% to 30%; microfiche dropped from 50% to 20%; while electronic products increased from 5% to 50%.[20] The amount of government information on CD-ROM and on the Internet continues to grow and is being absorbed into the electronic collection of the federal depository library. In FY1998, GPO distributed 40,000 tangible print, microfiche, or CD-ROM products, but more than 85,000 titles were made available on-line through GPO Access and more than 47,000 titles mounted on agency web sites were linked from GPO Access. The GPO Access service reached a monthly average of five million searches and ten to fifteen million document retrievals in FY 1998[21] with a total of 277.5 million documents retrieved by the public since it began operation in 1994.[22]

The transition from printed to electronic media has vastly increased the universe of information that should be within the scope of the program, but it has not obviated the need for the program to originate from a centralized point of collection and dissemination, nor the need for statutory "teeth" in accomplishing the mission of providing no-fee access to the citizenry. To ensure that both the challenges and the opportunities of the electronic environment can be met, GPO has outlined several strategic steps for legislative reform. First, a more expansive definition of government publication is critical to the continuance of the program in the electronic environment; any new legislation must encompass both traditional print materials and other information products or services regardless of form or format. A second critical factor in the success of any distributive program is the enforcement of deposit compliance in order to decrease the number of so-called "fugitive" documents. Finally, continuous and permanent public access to electronic government information must be guaranteed. Although these much-needed revisions to the program legislation in Title 44 have been proposed and debated, reform has not yet been achieved. The most recent reform bill, introduced in 1998, died in the Senate at the end of the 105th Congress.[23] It is unlikely that new legislation for a full-scale revision of Title 44 will be proposed during the final years of the Clinton Administration.

The recent assessment of a variety of government electronic information products conducted by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) cited the overall absence of government information policy and uniform standards and the general lack of planning and coordination necessary to guide electronic publishing, dissemination, permanent public access, and information life cycle management. Although it found some agencies ready to establish guidelines for web publishing, formats, and design, NCLIS noted that the problems of coping with multiple media and product formats, rapidly changing technology, and the development of cost-effective alternatives had not been widely addressed.[24]

While a critical core of materials will continue to be available in paper, thousands of traditional publications have simply disappeared or are now only available to the public electronically. Questions of intended audience, ultimate use, and appropriateness for electronic dissemination have largely been ignored. Tracking the location and/or availability of materials, particularly electronic materials, is an arduous task, which has been eased by a variety of finding tools posted on GPO Access. Some of these tools illustrate the cooperative or partnership arrangements between the program, GPO, and the private sector which must be forged in order to assure permanent access to FDLP electronic information.

GPO has also developed several guides to assist depository libraries in providing service for a wide variety of electronic products distributed with little or no technical documentation and issued without the benefit of most technical and software standards. First, recommended minimum technical guidelines for federal depository libraries have been issued by GPO since 1991; these became "specifications" in 1996 and are now updated annually.[25] In a related move in 1997, all depository libraries were required to have the capability to provide and support public access to government electronic information products. Second, a policy and planning document for managing the FDLP electronic collection was distributed in October 1998; in it components of the federal electronic collection are clearly defined:

1. Core legislative and regulatory GPO Access products which will reside permanently on GPO servers;

2. Other remotely accessible products managed by either GPO or by other institutions with which GPO has established formal agreements;

3. Remotely accessible electronic Government information products that GPO identifies, describes, and links to but which remain under the control of the originating agencies;

4. Tangible electronic Government information products distributed to Federal depository libraries.[26]

Finally, electronic service guidelines were published in 1998,[27] and early this year GPO distributed an Internet and on-line access policy statement defining a level of service for electronic media under the same principles and equal to that afforded traditional formats in depository libraries.[28]

As the government debates the reinvention of its role, libraries and librarians are also struggling to stay abreast of sources, software, and hardware, and to realign services to include both traditional and digital technology. The movement of information to electronic format is not a new phenomenon. Computer mainframes in the late 50s made possible the storage of massive amounts of data on tape. The On-line Computer Library Center (OCLC) bibliographic network and the first on-line public access catalogs were introduced in the 1970s, followed by on-line bibliographic databases such as ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) and MEDLINE (U.S. National Library of Medicine) and computerized search services such as DIALOG. By the time informational databases such as Cendata from the U.S. Census Bureau emerged in the 1980s, on-line services in general had been adopted by most libraries in the

United States. During the past decade, access to government bulletin boards, the use of file transfer protocol for downloading electronic information, the provision of modem-accessible data direct from government agency computers and the proliferation of Gopher sites bloomed and faded before the sudden and incredible riches of the Internet.

Most libraries struggled through a gearing-up period while hardware and software were acquired and librarians became computer literate; but the pace of computerization in libraries has generally lagged behind the rate of technological advance. In an effort to organize and harness government information on the Internet, many libraries developed comprehensive organizational and content-based web sites, both individually, such as the University of Michigan Documents Center,[29] and in collaboration with government agencies, such as the U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Network (DOSFAN) at the University of Illinois, Chicago, which provides Internet access to official documents and publications on U.S. foreign affairs.[30]

While supporting levels of technology and expertise are now present in most larger libraries, many small academic and public libraries have not yet acquired all the basic hardware or developed the necessary staff expertise to deal with the challenges posed by the electronic environment. Once sources or indexing are computerized, users will wait in line to use them despite the availability nearby of the printed version. For all too many users, history and a comprehensive literature search start with the beginning date of the on-line index, whether it is 1785 or 1980. Others may search only the Internet for their information needs without regard to origin, authenticity, or permanence of the source or its site location. Most readers still prefer to take the information found with them in print form, insuring that public demand for hard copy will continue to exist and along with it the costs for public printers, paper, toner, and service. Libraries will be forced to foot the bill or charge to recover costs, which may be considered a threat to the concept of no-fee public access.

The library user and research behavior are also in transition, according to Bruce. Although the process of collecting citations, reading articles, and drafting papers is the same, our ability to manipulate technology in this process has changed dramatically. E-mail discussion lists and electronic bulletin boards may provide more relevant and accessible literature than traditional literature and tools; but features of printed resources: good subject bibliographies and indexing; the ability to browse; and convenient, fast, reliable access to materials are also essential in electronic resources. Residual resistance to technology and full text electronic sources may continue to fade but the problems of reading from computer screens, the difficulty of establishing source and authority, and the question of backfile availability with electronic sources remain.[31]

Another pressing issue which has been a major concern in libraries throughout history is the maintenance and preservation of collections to assure availability for future generations. Each format presents unique challenges and requires the invention and application of creative conservation methods and techniques. Electronic information is bound by twin problems: the longevity of digital storage media and the accelerating rate of technological obsolescence. Long-term preservation of digital information will require constant effort and expense to upgrade and transfer files in response to each new technological iteration.[32] Many predict that we are already at risk of losing all digitally stored records and are on the brink of a digital Dark Age.[33] Supercomputer designer Hillis believes that technological solutions already exist for such problems as digital degradation, but that we lack the habit of long-term thinking that supports preservation.[34] Others, like Basefsky, are convinced that collaboration among libraries is essential to the guarantee of future free access to government information. He calls for libraries to treat federal electronic information in the same way as traditional materials: collect, catalog (provide access to), archive, authenticate, and make available to the public. As with print materials, libraries must also repair (copy, update, upgrade), and occasionally replace individual items to ensure a useful vital collection. With electronic sources, the library will need to keep links and pointers (addresses) current as well as upgrade equipment and

storage media.[35]

While the evolution from print to bit has forced a reevaluation of traditional structures and methodologies in libraries, it has also provided exceptional opportunities to enhance and improve public access to government information as well as presenting challenges to accommodate a fast moving electronic target without compromising equitable distribution and access. Despite the astonishing number of personal computers in homes and schools, electronic formats continue to be the least accessible and egalitarian with respect to individual readers. Expansion of competition in the telecommunications industry will likely lead to increased commercialization of the Internet as well. Libraries must continue to provide a bridge between information and the ability to pay. GPO and the depository libraries must share the responsibility for long-term access, a concept which is reflected in the growing number of partnership agreements between GPO and other agencies and the libraries.

On the library side, attempts at resolving the tension between the existing depository program and the changing environment include the development of local and regional consortia, cooperative programs, networked resources, and guides to navigate and interpret the mass of government information available electronically. In the library community, as in the government, initiatives must be accomplished in the face of shrinking resources and complex technology. Cooperation among libraries is not a new idea. Interlibrary loan is perhaps the oldest form of resource sharing, a pragmatic recognition that no one library can be completely self-sufficient. Planning began in 1987 for what has become the largest shared library system in the nation, the Ohio Library and Information Network (OhioLINK), a consortium of 74 Ohio college and university libraries with merged on-line catalogs now containing seven million records and representing over 24 million library items. In addition to facilitating user-initiated lending supported by a daily delivery system, OhioLINK also provides access to 67 research and citation databases, including a variety of full-text resources.[36]

Because of the nature of the charge to depository libraries and the structure of government information in a large government bureaucracy, an unusually strong and supportive bond has developed among depository library staff. United by the same challenges and problems, we have created informal and formal support groups both independently and in collaboration with other national groups. These include the Depository Library Council to the Public Printer; the Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA GODORT) as well as similar state and regional documents organizations; and the Internet discussion list, GOVDOC-L. These groups provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information, foster mentoring relationships among their participants, suggest answers to difficult reference questions, and share advice on diverse issues of depository library operation and policy.

From this perspective, it is clear that traditional U.S. federal depository collections will continue to be used by agencies, scholars, and the public in new and non-traditional ways. The increasing number of on-line government information sources, such as those available through GPO ACCESS; the growing amount of government information posted directly to the Internet by agencies or by agreements between libraries, educational institutions, private organizations, and commercial firms; and the large number of sources converted to CD-ROM or other electronic formats may lessen the demand for paper and microfiche documents but are unlikely to eliminate that demand in the near future. Librarians now promote the virtues of access over ownership, rename their educational programs and their institutions without benefit of the Latin liber, and embrace, instead, a slippery concept of information without regard to form or format. We speak confidently and hopefully of virtual libraries and libraries without walls, while the specter of distance education stalks both the university and its libraries and shakes their foundations. We continue to wrestle with the concepts of authority, citation, location, and permanence on a vast and shifting field of quicksand against a backdrop of amazing and captivating material just beyond the computer keyboard. Print is enveloped by color and sound and moving images; knowledge is hyperlinked from one idea to the next and the pathways and possibilities are infinite. By defining new roles and inserting them into traditional staff positions, librarians may become the trainers, facilitators, and interpreters of government

information in the new millennium and remain at the center of the information puzzle.

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Latest Revision: *June 7, 1999*

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